DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 097 CG 022 602

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TITLE Developmental Tasks of the Maintenance Stage of Career Development and Implications for Counselors.
PUB DATE 16 Mar 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development (Cincinnati, OH, March 16-19, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrators; *Career Development; Health Personnel; *Maintenance; *Maturity (Individuals); *Occupational Aspiration; Promotion (Occupational)

ABSTRACT

This study empirically examined the tasks of the maintenance stage of career development as posited by Super (1957), which include holding one's own, keeping up with new developments, and breaking new ground. Participants included upper and mid-level managers in a health care organization. The participants were between the ages of 35 and 64 and had identified themselves as being in the maintenance stage as described in a checklist completed at the beginning of the study. An open-ended question format was used which asked participants to list major career concerns which they had at the present time and the way in which they were dealing with those concerns. Principal component analysis of the data resulted in six latent components. They were: (1) keeping up with new developments; (2) questioning further direction and goals; (3) struggling to hold on; (4) pursuing further education; (5) preparing for retirement; and (6) demonstrating managerial competence and shifting focus. These six components were inferred to represent the developmental tasks of maintenance. As such, they support Super's conceptual model of maintenance. Given the high percentage of people in the maintenance stage of career development, it seems critical that more attention be given to understanding the career development issues of persons at this juncture. (ABL)

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Developmental Tasks of the Maintenance Stage of Career Development and Implications for Counselors

by

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Paper Presented at the
Annual Convention of
The American Association for Counseling and Development
March 16-19, 1990, Cincinnati, Ohio

CG 022602

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Overview of the Study

This study empirically examined the tasks of the maintenance stage of career development as posited by Super (1957), which include holding one's own; keeping up with new developments, and breaking new ground. Prior to this time, the maintenance stage had been developed and expanded upon conceptually. However, no work had empirically tested Super's conceptual model. This study was designed to fill that gap.

Participants for the study included upper and mid-level managers in a health care organization. The participants were between the ages of 35 and 64 and were ones who had identified themselves as being in the maintenance stage as described in a checklist they completed at the beginning of the study. Fifty-five percent of the participants in the study were males and forty-five percent were female.

The study used an open-ended question format which asked research participants to list the major career concern which they had at the present time and the way in which they were dealing with that concern. The particular method used in this study was designed following the critical incident technique guidelines developed by Flanagan (1954). Its use allowed for an analysis which described empirically the tasks of the maintenance stage of career development.

Principal component analysis of the data resulted in six latent components. They were: (1) Keeping up with new developments; (2) Questioning further direction and goals; (3) Struggling to hold on; (4) Pursuing further education; (5) Preparing for retirement; and (6) Demonstrating managerial competence and shifting focus.

These six components which emerged were inferred to represent the developmental tasks of maintenance. As such, they support Super's conceptual model of maintenance which include the above mentioned tasks of holding one's own; keeping up with new developments, and breaking new ground, while at the same time demonstrating the complexity of maintenance and the many ways in which it can be experienced.

These inferred tasks merit some further discussion. The theme of the task inferred from the first component was keeping up with new developments and changes in the field. It appeared that the coping in this way was in order to do a better job presently and to prepare for future change. The word "change" was mentioned in over 1/3 of the responses. This appears to indicate that dealing with changes that seem to be coming faster and faster in all fields are a high priority for workers. Implications here seem to be for places of employment to keep their employees attuned to what changes are happening within the field and to develop ways for keeping the employees educated and informed on these changes. The crossroads referred to in the task inferred from component two is one that is a natural outgrowth of being at midlife. Levinson, Darron, Klein, Levinson,

and McKee (1978) spoke of this crossroads as part of the developmental process of moving into middle adulthood. They discussed it as a time of transition when the old ways no longer fit current realities. This time then, is a letting go of the "old ways" without necessarily having formulated any "new" ways yet to latch on to. More likely, it is a time fraught with questions and often anxiety as one tries to plan ahead, while realizing that one's future is indeed, limited. Bridges (1980) discussed the potential of this in-between time; he referred to it as the "neutral zone" and considers it to be an ideal to get to know oneself better and to set new goals which can be both realistic and meaningful.

The dilemma of struggling to hold on, mentioned in the task inferred from component three can have an emotional charge for the maintenance stage employee. Hall and Kram (1981) discussed the impact of being dead-ended and how this can play on the feeling state of those at midcareer who are also in maintenance; "The reality of blocked opportunity sets in motion a significant period of reassessment and self-reflection that is generally characterized by feelings of self-doubt, anger, and/or frustration" (p. 413).

Another perspective for understanding the "desire for job security" implied in component three is Schein's (1978) conceptualization of "career anchor". This anchor, a need for security, may explain why the respondents in this category did not mention seeking jobs in other organizations as often as an answer to their dilemma. Instead, they continue to rely on their current organization for what they consider to be their

top priority -- "a stable and predictable future" (Schein, 1978, p. 52).

The task inferred from component four, which recognized the value that is being placed on further education, is having a large impact on the educational community. Forty million Americans who are experiencing a career transition of some sort, including a job change, are returning to school to assist them in their transition (Arbeiter, Aslanian, Schmerbeck and Brickell, 1978). This study certainly supports that phenomenon. The results of this back-to-school movement has several implications. First, if it continues it will surely challenge colleges to review their criteria for accepting students; that is, admission to colleges will need to be based more on current performance and potential and less on outdated high school transcripts. Second, it will challenge colleges to design course curricula which has practical application as well as being as up-to-date as possible. This is the only way it can be useful to students who need skills that can be taken back to their work setting. Another impact of the back to school movement is that the employee benefit of tuition reimbursement may come under closer scrutiny. Though organization at one time may have reimbursed 100% for any course work completed, the trend now seems to be turning toward partial reimbursement for course work which has been judged to be appropriate for certain jobs.

The urgency with which employees are signing up for courses suggests that they often may see education as the answer to their current job dissatisfaction. While the promise of promotion is not necessarily voiced, there seems to be an unspoken belief

that further education equals better pay or a better job. In those instances where this belief is not, in fact, true, the organization bears the responsibility of communicating to the employee what is and is not possible with further education.

In reviewing the contributions made to the task inferred from component five, it is useful to look closer at the individuals who are represented. The 13 subjects represented in this group were divided between the 45-54 and 55-64 age group categories. What is interesting is that for some (particularly in the younger age cluster), the decision to focus on retirement concerns was not necessarily a natural next step (though for some it was), but, at times, it was a premature step as a means of dealing with current career-related frustrations. It is possible that, given the ages of those who fell into inferred task five, a change of careers or jobs was no longer seen as a viable choice. A society that often stresses youth over wisdom may have contributed to a mind set that resulted in an "I'm too old to begin again" attitude.

From the results of the task inferred from component six, which emphasized competence, it appears that the focus during maintenance may shift from what one is doing to how one is doing. Hall and Kram (1981) believe that the need to display competence is a central dilemma for the older worker who wants to maintain his or her sense of integrity and contribution.

In regard to this issue of competence, Schein (1978) shed some further light on the issue, viewed once again from his conceptualization of career anchors. In his study, he found

that for some of his respondents, the demonstration of managerial competence was a career anchor in its own right.

To summarize the finds, the conclusion drawn from the data on each inferred task appear to reflect well the key concepts generated from each task. They also are backed up by research which further affirms their existence and possible causality. While there may be some alternative interpretations, the clarity with which the respondents worded their concerns left little room to doubt their meaning, and made for some ease in translating concerns into inferred tasks. Therefore, the writer places a high degree of confidence in the conclusions generated from the data. Further, it is useful to examine the content of the responses to identify the feeling states and behaviors of the participants in order to get a clearer picture of how they saw themselves and to determine the implications for working with individuals at the midlife/midcareer juncture.

Looking first at the area of feeling states, frustration was the feeling state expressed most often in subjects' responses. Frustration appeared to originate in three sources. The first source is the frustration that accompanies the experience of being plateaued, and this was the primary source. This frustration was mentioned frequently enough (in 30% of the responses) that it was seen as one overall theme of the study. Rather than a condemnation of the organization, these "frustrations" indicate quite strongly that many subjects in the study were reporting on the experience of being plateaued. The lament of the plateaued manager can take many forms -- as evidenced in the variety recorded in the study. Examples include: feeling

burned out, having the experience of being trapped; being ignored; realizing that one's last promotion probably was the last promotion; feeling stagnant, putting out feelers to other organizations just to test one's worth, feeling that one's "turn" is over and becoming cynical and dissatisfied with one's job responsibilities. All of these can be costly; both to the organization and the employee.

Another frustration that runs parallel to the experience of being plateaued, but which may be looked at separately for its own contribution is the issue of job longevity. In a study of job longevity, Katz (1977) found that "long tenure in any sort of role is likely to create difficulties for the role holder" (Beckhard, 1977, p. 163). And the way these difficulties manifest themselves is often in job dissatisfaction. The issue then becomes one of trying to modify the impact of job longevity.

The second source of frustration was in response to the many changes with which subjects were faced. These changes included not only a change in work responsibilities (though these are significant as well), but changes in supervisor, in policy, in procedures, in their field, and in the health care industry as a whole.

The third source of frustration appeared to be the sense of being overwhelmed with responsibilities. This may stem, in part from the overspecialization skills which were a natural part of the early career years, but a hindrance in the mid-career maintenance years. It appears that this frustration is more likely to peak at maintenance than at any time earlier or later. In the establishment stage, one is given his or her first

professional responsibilities and is watched to see how they are handled. In the pre-retirement years, responsibilities are slowly turned over to a successor. But in the years in between--the maintenance years--one is often rewarded for a job well done by being given more responsibilities.

Beckhard (1977) discussed the "restlessness" among high potential managers which is not unlike the frustration of managers in this study. "I believe that this restlessness reflects a widespread concern on the part of executives today for a more integrated and fulfilling work and family life" (p. 160). His point is well taken. One of the avenues worthy of exploration for the plateaued employee is the quality of his or her non-work time. Quite often, the focus of the earlier years is moving into and up through the organization. Therefore, the emphasis is on career. But in the middle years, there is often a shift for a number of people, in which family concerns begin to take a higher priority (Wolfe and Kolb, 1980). For those who experience this shift, there is an accompanying drop in emphasis in the work sphere of one's life. One could speculate, then, that under these conditions, being plateaued would not be as devastating. Further, it would seem possible that for those who do experience a work plateau (and all of us will, according to Bardwich, 1986), a shift in priorities and an effort at more quality, non-work time may have a palliative effect.

While frustration represented the feeling state expressed by many participants, the behaviors represented in the inferred tasks could be categorized into three areas: worrying, investigating, and doing.

The worrying category included those who seemed to respond rather passively to their current career dilemma. Words like "showing concern, reacting to pressure, and keeping quiet" sum up their behaviors.

The second category were those seen as primarily engaged in investigating or deliberating a plan of action. These people represent a midpoint on the continuum between the worriers and the doers.

The final category -- the doers -- represented almost half of the participants. These were the people who perhaps had already "done their homework" or were more inclined to take action more quickly.

Conclusions

The major results of this study which bear directly on the study's hypothesis were that the tasks of holding one's own and keeping up with new developments were found to emerge as inferred tasks in their own right and therefore, support Super's theory which posits that the maintenance stage is composed of the tasks of keeping up with new developments, holding one's own, and breaking new ground. While keeping up with new developments and holding one's own emerged clearly as individual tasks, breaking new ground can be inferred to be a part of component two: questioning further direction and goals, and component four: pursuing further education. Further, the task inferred from component five: preparing for retirement appears to be anticipatory behavior which conforms to the beginning of the next stage in Super's career development model, Retirement or Decline. However, these do not appear to be sequential

tasks that all pass through in order. Rather, they are four responses, among others, to the experience of being at the maintenance stage of career development. A person's career at this stage becomes more one of self-direction (Hall, 1976), and less one of performing in the exact same manner as one's co-workers.

As all these tasks suggest, the responses of subjects in this study appear to be "responses to novel, non-maturational problems which presently confront many people" (Super & Knasel, 1981, p. 196). The tasks listed here support Super and Knasel's conceptualization of "adaptability" which is not seen as a loss of control to the environment, nor an effort to act independent of the environment. Rather, it is a "Process of finding a balance between acceptance of the pressures that come from the world of work and making his or her own impact" (Super and Knasel, 1981, p. 199).

Implications

Results of this study have implications for educating people who ork with adults in career-related areas. The results suggest that it may be appropriate to organize workshops designed to explain what the developmental tasks of maintenance and midcareer are.

For Counselors working with maintenance stage adults, it is important to be aware of the concerns they bring with them. What may sound like "complaining" about their job needs to be seen from a broader perspective. These points may be useful to keep in mind:

1. Dissatisfaction may come from burnout or not having

one's skills properly utilized

2. Questioning for the maintenance stage adult is natural. While it may be directed specifically at issues of "meaning" in work, it may also reflect a desire to find meaning and purpose in one's life in general.
3. For those who have responsibility for developing delivery systems for course work to returning adult students, consider issues of relevant content, up-to-date information and a delivery of instruction that takes into account the uniqueness of adult students
4. Challenge the stereotype of "up is the only way". Explore alternative ways for maintenance stage workers to find satisfaction in work.
5. Explore quality of life issues. Are there ways for the maintenance stage worker to find meaning and satisfaction in life areas that are <u>not</u> tied to one's job?

What is obvious from the findings of this study is that work with people in the maintenance stage of career development has just begun to scratch the surface. Given the high percentage of workers who comprise this stage, it seems critical that more attention be given to understanding the career development issues of persons at this juncture, especially if our commitment as counselors is to enhancing the quality of life for all people.

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